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ABSTRACT

Supporting her theory that the Puerto Rican has a uniqueness which she calls "el jibaro," Maria Teresa Babin has edited an anthology, "Boringuen." The anthology, a political treatise in its own right, presents an historical and topical view of "representative" Puerto Rican literature. The literature, sometimes superficially nonpolitical, serves a political purpose as Babin interprets its meaning in her introduction to each section. The cry for freedom, for dignity, and for involvement in one's own destiny remains constant in every work. Babin has given to the English speaking reader a collection of Puerto Rican literature which represents the best writing of the culture and shows the reader how to read it. The political theme may not be denied or ignored as writers call for the right to their own language, their own architecture, and their own alliances. By geographical incident and innate nature, the Puerto Rican is political, whether on the island or the mainland. (Author/GC)

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Political Aspects of Puerto Rican Literature, Primarily Insular

Introduction

Concerned with a topic like political themes in Puerto Rican literature, I have chosen to review the anthology which María Teresa Babín published in 1974 as being at once a political act and a prototype of the ways in which all Puerto Rican literature may be seen --politically. First, she or Stan Steiner has translated many of the heretofor untranslated works into English, making the material available for the first time to the English speaking reader. Since the selected works are often protest literature, making them available to English speakers enlarges the impact of the protest. Then in her preface to each section, she forces the reader to consider each work politically. And since she also has arranged the material as both a political and a literary history of Puerto Rico, she has emphasized the fact that every piece of Puerto Rican literature is political from the earliest oral tradition, to the most abstract "nature" poem or the seemingly sentimental "love" poem. At the heart of each, regardless of how harmless the surface appears, lies the same beat. Her inclusion of the writings of avowedly political figures is another "independent" act since very seldom do we consider such writing "literature". Thus her historical and literary arrangement forces the reader to see not the immediate protest act and thus reduce the whole to topical literature, as is the case in much ethnic literature, but to understand that the Puerto Rican stance is firmly rooted in history, predicts, and informs the future.

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The Work Itself

If I were to consider the word "political" as related to a particular political party and if I were to interpret literature in its broadest sense, I could discuss politicians as authors and limit my topic to a concern with the Puerto Rican/United States relationship or Puerto Rico and its communist neighbor, Cuba. Then the material would fall loosely into three broad categories: statehood, commonwealth, independence. Or if I were to look only at the Puerto Rican in the States, I might use The Puerto Rican Struggle: Essays on Survival in the U.S. written by Clara Rodríguez et. al. as a point of departure. In such a context, certainly the work of Samuel Betances, David García, Victor Hernandez Cruz would demand attention.

However, as a comparatist, I do not feel qualified to undertake any of the discussions suggested above. Therefore, I would like to confine my observations to María Teresa Babín's Borinquen, and in so doing to uncover those traits which I believe inform a "political" stance, to comment on the political impact of this work, and to look closely at one or two pieces.

Some time ago the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote an article in which she discussed the particular characteristics of island peoples as determined by the very geographical conditions of their lives:

> All island cultures have a highly developed sense of identity. In the middle of a big continent, an immigrant group, for example, tends to get lost, to lose its identity. An island is different. You can encompass it in your imagination. You can sail around it. You can have been everywhere on it. There's no ambiguity about its boundaries. And islands are different from one another. ...the Puerto Ricans are immigrants to their own island. We tend to forget this, and treat the Puerto Ricans as if they evolved on the island, as if the Garden of Eden were there. The Puerto Rican culture is a second-level culture, like the culture of the North American immigrants.

While I would not consider Mead's views deterministic in the sense that the individual is necessarily controlled by or limited to the characteristic induced by the geographical accident of birth, I do find her ideas provocative and informative in understanding the Puerto Rican world view. Moreover when a scholar, María Teresa Babín, gives a paper in which she discusses an archetype existing in and confined to Puerto Rican literature, an illusive ever-present presence, Mead's findings are to an extent given some substance. Babín explains "el jíbaro" which she maintains is the essence of Puerto Ricanism and undergirds every aspect of the Puerto Rican experience:

> It is different from other recognizable symbols in the world of literature in which dominant characters become stereotypes identified by a given name, such as Don Quijote, Don Juan, La Celestina, Hamlet and Moby Dick. Yet the collective and national imprint gives the jíbaro symbol a coherent form. Nevertheless, it is not a replica of a known subject with individual characteristics transferred with photographic realism. It is, rather, a substantive concept that permeates the whole structure of Puerto Rican life and creativity.

The political implications I would derive from the writings of these two authors would be that any political stance a Puerto Rican might assume would be informed by a basic world view conditioned by geography and dictated by a unique tradition. Moreover the Puerto Rican would be political by virtue of being Puerto Rican; that is, the individual would not remain peripheral, would move to control the environment, to wrench an order acceptable to the individual from the chaos of existence.

With these ideas in mind, then, let us consider the anthology of Puerto Rican literature which María Teresa Babín has assembled. The political impact of such a book may not, it seems to me, be ignored. The very title Borinquen carries the essence of the Puerto Rican spirit, and the works included serve to unify the Puerto Rican in a recognition of their common heritage. Moreover, as we have already noted, the works have been translated

into English so that the reading public may understand the spirit and the protest. Her "Introduction" in a sense presents an historical background for and interpretation of the works which she has included, but in a larger sense the "Introduction" becomes the prelude to the book which is a manifesto of the Puerto Rican Political Essence. Writing in 1974 and aligning herself with the contagious identity movement codified in part by Alex Haley's Roots, she finds the origins of the political implications of Puerto Rican authors in the voices from the Taino which "flow without interruption from the early cantos of the sixteenth century to the most recent outbursts. ...in their denunciations of social and political evils the Puerto Rican writer has revived the memory of the hidden Taino stamina to strengthen the path to the future." An insistence on a review of the roots - the Taino, African, and Spanish roots - becomes a political move. Puerto Rico is the most "homogeneous and congenial country in terms of spiritual and emotional communication among its people," Babín asserts and she continues that this persistent trait never falters, "as if we had made a secret pact to communicate with each other in this search for our image in all the sources of our inner self." Babín sees in the Literary history of the island a constant patriotic concern, an awakening of the Puerto Rican conscience to defend its language and traditions. Since 1930 the very literary forms themselves have attested to the patriotic and national theme of "liberty." "The ideological theme throughout this book," then, according to Babín, "is the love of freedom and independence." The voice of Agüeybana urging his people to defend the land where they were born and raised as Tainos echoes through the 516 pages of this anthology.

It is fitting then that the first selection should be "Let Me Tell You the Story" written by a Jibaro, recounting the revolt of the Indian Guarionex against the Spanish in 1511. The second selection, "The Revolt of the Borinqueños," written by Juan de Castellanos contains the oration of Agüeybana -

the battle cry:

> "Speak up, forgetful dwellers in this land,
> Snoring at ease, who not e'en in sleep complain.
> Were you not born with weapons in your hand?
> Rather than headlong flight across the plain
> Were it not better in the hills to stand?
> Speaking of war, must I speak to you in vain?
> How is it we have not in all our host
> One voice to tell the good of the good we lost?

So the manifesto begins with a battle cry; it ends with a cry of protest and a resolve to fight for a New Nation, the "Mass of the People, Church of Saint Mark's in the Bowery" by Father David García for his congregation on New York's Lower East Side:

> THE PRESIDENT AND THE PEOPLE: We are gathered here in the name of Jesus Christ and in the name of all those who have suffered in the struggle for Justice. In the name of Betances, Campos, Torres, Zapata, Bolívar, Ché, Martínez, and all the brothers and sisters among us and with us.
> We are present here to demand a New World where men and women from the city and the fields may live and work together.

And Psalm 21 "Why Have You Forgotten Me?":

> I will praise You when my people
> come together.
> My hymns will echo in the midst of a great people.
>
> The poor will have a banquet,
> They will celebrate a great feast:
> The birth of a New Nation.

Babín has thus very carefully constructed this anthology so that beginning with the earliest known existence, the Taino and the Jibaro, the political stance has been established and predicted. Then Babín has given us an apparently chronological and topical development of Puerto Rican literature, but in reality the works have been chosen to reinforce the political sensibility by reinforcing the essence of national authenticity and the concept of the Puerto Rican soul as Pedreira reveals it in his essay "The Land and Its Meaning" in the book Insularismo. Having discussed the military and economic

invaders that have sought to change the very center of Puerto Rican being, his conclusion reiterates the fact that a house to suit the particular needs of this particular people will finally be constructed - symbolically we may read this as a very political metaphor suggesting that an economic and political system congenial to this people must and will be developed.

Complimenting Pedreira and insisting upon that national authenticity that is at the political center, Babín has included her own "Symbols of Boriquen" in which she extols the magic of the words casabe, güiro, batey, and bohío as symbols of the fatherland and she asks, "Why do they (the words) sound as much mine in the full consciousness of the twentieth century, stirred by the thousand temptations and threats of the space lit by artificial lights? They sing to me and they weep in the still solitude of my unquiet life, plunging me into the discovery of Borinquen in myself." Clearly her purpose is not to plunge the twentieth century individual back into the sixteenth, but rather to uncover a subliminal consciousness that will unite this people, recall their values, spur them on to greater political awareness, and present a seasoned voice of protest.

Idealizing the Jibaro and elevating the commonplace to have symbolic value may provide the basis for developing an awareness, but, as I have already suggested, the insistence on independence becomes more than a leitmotiv; it is a steady drumbeat. Ricardo Alegría (1963) retells a story from Puerto Rican folklore and calls it "The Renegades." In his play "The Cry of Lares" (1914) Luis Lloréns Torres retells the story of Lares which rebellion exists along with the Bastille and Bunker Hill in symbolizing the struggle against tyranny and injustice, the revolution for freedom. Yet Lloréns Torres is calling for more than rebellion; he is calling for a "confederation of the three Antilles." A concern for the preservation of the language is voiced in an excerpt from "The Redeemers." This selection from Manuel Zeno Gandía's tetraology

"The Chronicles of a Sick World" (1925) concludes with:

> "They seek that our language of the future be born from a cadaver."
> "A waste of millions!"
> "Yes, it's a shame."
> "Never, among us can our intimate thoughts be expressed in the English Language."
> "Never."

This insistence that the Spanish language embodies the soul of the people is reiterated several times and adds to the independence throb, almost as a more primal beat underlying the Casaba-güiro-batey-bohío refrain. Although the three poems by Luis Palés Matos "Black Dance," "Pueblo," and "The Call" may not seem to serve the political statement of the book, they, along with Francisco Arrivi's "Masquerade: Devil Masks," subtly emphasize the national composition of the people, reminding them and us of their special place in the world order, the fusion of three peoples into a single force enshrined in the soul of every Puerto Rican. Of course, selections from Pedro Albizu Campos as well as from Luis Muñoz Rivera and Luis Muñoz Marín are included as direct, undisguised political statements calling for freedom and improved living conditions for Puerto Rico's millions. Curiously although the political persuasions of these three men differed widely, in this anthology the selections compliment and reinforce each other.

Finally because the soul of a people is most truly captured by the poet/bard/prophet, we should look for a moment more closely at what the poets say. For example, Concha Meléndez in 1923 wrote a lovely poem praising the island's beauty, its lofty mountains; but the adjective "lovely" belies the very marrow of the poem. The poetess can not be content to bask in the splendor of nature, but must extract from the very geography itself a fuller significance, for the mountains held the secrets of past victories and the spirits of liberators. Virgin bosom, fantastic kisses, and maiden's dreams serve only as metaphors to emphasize the glory of the race and the promise of an even greater future.

THE MOUNTAINS KNOW

By Concha Meléndez

I love my country's lofty mountains!
Here, where all is soft and quiet.
They are untamed.
They are the symbol of a hidden power
That germinates through the ages.

Sometimes the storm bursts upon their summits;
Into their virgin bosom the dew shakes its tears;
The sun surrounds them with a thousand halos;
The mist offers them fantastic kisses;

But they lift their foreheads
Unmoved before the mysteries that life contains,
Before men's struggles and petty ambitions,
Which are nothing, if seen across unfathomable,
Infinite eternity.

The mountains, nearby, are like a glowing hope;
And from afar, like in a maiden's dream,
Floating in the blue distance.

Why do they rise thoughtful and serene?
Because they know many things unknown to us;
And in the nights full of blossoms,
The stars have told them the shining destinies
Of all the islands:
The great old past of the Isles of Greece,
The great new future that awaits the Antilles;
Of the genius of a victorious race.
The great deeds of Latin America,
The hymn of the peoples that are unfurling,
One and many at the same time,
The banner of Bolívar's dream!

The mountains know it,
The mountains lofty and unmoved!

Meléndez writes on the island, but Pedro Pietri writes out of the Neorican experience. Yet his poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary," in 1977 parallels that of Meléndez in a sense, for Pietri, too, deals with the immediate surroundings. However, he does not find "lofty mountains;" he finds all the squalor and degradation of the world in which he exists, the ghetto. Still like Meléndez in the fullness of the experience and in the center of the picture, he sees the same reality: the glory of the race. Unlike Meléndez, though, he prophesies a

greater future "only if —". These ghetto dwellers may not look to the mountains for their strength; they must look into their own selves to find the mountains of power, lofty and unmoved. I will give you here only the first two stanzas of the poem, yet these will demonstrate quite well Pietri's thesis:

Never knowing
That they are beautiful
people
Never knowing
The geography of their
complexion
PUERTO RICO IS A BEAUTIFUL PLACE
PUERTORRIQUEÑOS ARE A
BEAUTIFUL RACE

If only they
Had turned off the television
And tuned into their own
imaginations
If only they
Had used the white
supremacy bibles
For toilet paper purpose
And made their Latin souls
The only religion of their race

Thus as Babín moves through the literary outpourings of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the States, she shows the English speaker how to read the literary productions of her countrymen. That story, poem, essay, drama, all utter the same cry, a cry for freedom, a protest against imperialism, injustice, and reduction.